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Comment on "Religious Life in East Timor"

The Indonesian Regime's Attitude Towards Religion in General

The Indonesian military regime does not uphold the banner of any particular religion. All Indonesian citizens are required by law to adhere to one of the five state-recognised, monotheist religions - Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Other religions are not recognised, or permitted; nor is atheism permitted. Religious adherence is therefore a matter of compulsion and has nothing to do with religious freedom.

Although Islam has far and away the largest following in Indonesia, it does not occupy a privileged status. On the contrary, despite the long tradition of Muslim involvement in public life through political as well as social organisations, Muslims are now, like all other religious believers, required by law to organise themselves solely on the basis of the State ideology, the Pancasila. The 1985 Societies Law requires all organisations, including those based on religion, ... to abandon such beliefs and to adopt Pancasila as their sole principle or ideology. As a result of this Law, all religious organisations alongside organisations of any other nature, are to be subjected to direct State control; they can have their elected leaders replaced or their organisations simply dissolved if the Executive considers them to be acting contrary to government policy or State "interests".

The religion most directly affected by this new Law is Islam, the majority religion in Indonesia. In any case, preachers are required to obtain permission from the authorities, and many who are considered to be anti-government have been blacklisted so as to prevent religious assemblies from hearing them. Over the years, preachers have been arrested as "extremist preachers". The most recent wave of arrests occurred last September, and a number of those being held are expected to be tried shortly under Indonesia's draconian anti-subversion law.

The Catholic Church in East Timor

The fate of Islam in Indonesia is of direct relevance to Catholicism in East Timor. It is likewise the majority religion and has, even more so than Islam in Indonesia, assumed the role of spokesperson for an oppressed population in a situation where the right to organise, whether in political parties, trade or peasants organisations, women's and youth organisations, simply does not exist.

It is quite intolerable for the Indonesian authorities to use its alleged provision of facilities for religious practice as a smokescreen for the blatant violation of all forms of freedom and human rights to which the people of East Timor have been subjected since the start of the Indonesian occupation. The authorities claim that the high rate of baptisms and conversions is proof of religious freedom. On the contrary, people have flocked to the Church to seek protection and

support from the one institution that has survived with a degree of independence from the occupation authorities. The authorities would indeed like the clergy "to fully devote themselves to their pastoral duties" (page 7) and not concern themselves with the hardships suffered under Indonesian rule. The clashes between Church and State have occurred precisely because Church leaders have not been prepared to do this.

Both former and present leaders of the East Timor Church have been subjected to interference from the military authorities, and issued with repeated reprimands and warnings for voicing their opinions inside East Timor and internationally. There are restraints however on what the Indonesians can do to the Church because, despite all their efforts, the Vatican has not agreed to integrate the Church into the Indonesian Bishop's Conference.

There have been many attempts to impose de facto ecclesiastical integration. In 1981, the Indonesian administration tried to force the East Timor Church to replace Portuguese with Indonesian as the language for Mass. The clergy rejected the demand and sought the Vatican's permission to replace Portuguese with Tetum. Approval was granted in October 1981, and Mass is now conducted in Tetum. There was also an attempt to bring about the integration of the Church in Oecusse with the Indonesian Bishop's Conference, but this was prevented by Mgr Belo after seeking the views of the people living in the enclave.

The only people in a position to judge the validity of Indonesian claims about its funding and assistance to the Catholics in East Timor are members of the Catholic community themselves, and only if they are able to express their views freely and without Indonesian supervision. They must also be allowed to state their opinion on the activities of Indonesian churchmen, many of them Army chaplains, who are being used by the occupation authorities in their attempt to gain control of religious activities.

As for Indonesian government claims about the number of churches "built" and "rehabilitated" since 1976 in East Timor, what it fails to divulge is how many churches have been destroyed in that same period, and by whom. The matter of cooperation between the Catholic Churches in East Timor and Indonesia is of concern only to the two Churches in question and is of no concern to the Indonesian Government. Its efforts "to promote cooperation between the Apostolic Administrator in Dili an the Bishop's Conference in Indonesia" (page 3) are quite unwarranted and can only be interpreted as an effort on the Government's part to secure ecclesiastical integration by the back door. Nor is it tolerable for the Indonesian Government to determine that "financial assistance from churches abroad are (sic) being channeled through the Bishop's Conference". (page 5) The Church in East Timor is an independent body and should be able to establish direct contact with agencies in other countries that wish to support relief work and other desperately needed social activities in East Timor.

London, 26 ~~August~~ April 1985